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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: PDP WITHDRAWS FROM OCTOBER 2009 PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS

REF: A. TUNIS 569
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 144

Classified by CDA Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) At an August 25 press conference, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) announced its withdrawal from the October 25 Presidential elections. PDP president Nejib Chebbi stated that he will not run for president in the October elections, nor will the party field any other candidate for president. Chebbi slammed the GOT for fostering a climate of repression, contrary to the principle of free, fair and transparent elections. Chebbi held the GOT responsible for closing off opportunities for Tunisian youths and warned that the GOT's approach would ultimately endanger Tunisia's political stability and national security. The party leadership says that it will now focus solely on legislative elections and has 26 candidates ready to contest elections in the different provinces. The PDP's withdrawal from the race effectively leaves only four "tame" and/or marginal candidates running against Ben Ali. End Summary.

Chebbi and Party Drop Out

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a press conference on August 25, the eve of the official deadline for presentation of presidential candidates to the Constitutional Council, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) announced its withdrawal from the October 2009 presidential elections. PDP President Nejib Chebbi stated that he will not run for president and that no other party member will represent the party in the presidential race. While technically ineligible to run after the GOT's revisions to the electoral law, PDP leaders had previously said that Chebbi would "run" anyway. Chebbi denounced the complete absence of basic freedoms, fairness, and transparency in the run-up to elections and stated that the October 2009 elections will simply perpetuate President Ben Ali's tenure as "president for life." In the last elections in 2004, the PDP declined to contest either the presidential or the legislative elections, on the same grounds.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Chebbi explained that he had announced his bid for the presidency in February 2008 as a political maneuver to prevent the GOT from changing the electoral laws. Although the PDP's tactics failed to realize a climate of free and open elections, Chebbi claimed the party's efforts resulted in credible gains. He asserted that the party succeeded in appealing to the conscience of many Tunisians and their right

to participate in the electoral process. Chebbi held the GOT and Ben Ali responsible for "shutting all opportunities for Tunisian youths" to be freely engaged in the Tunisian electoral process and opined that this decision will ultimately endanger the country's political stability and national security.

¶4. (SBU) Chebbi also stated that despite the PDP's withdrawal from the presidential election, the party supported and respected the right of Ahmed Brahim of opposition Party Ettajdid to submit his candidacy for president to the Constitutional Council. (Note: Ettajdid, distinct from the other "opposition" parties running, has been relatively more independent and less deferential to the GOT. End note.) Chebbi underlined that, since the PDP is no longer interested in the presidential elections, he was not endorsing Brahim, but rather a statement of principled support for the right of another independent legal opposition party to contest the presidency.

The Case for Maya Jribi

¶5. (SBU) PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi, the only PDP member eligible to run for president under the July 2008 Amendment to the electoral law, reiterated Chebbi's disapproval of the electoral process and the party's complete withdrawal from the presidential elections. Jribi underlined that she will not run for president in Chebbi's place, as some had hoped. Jribi stated that the 2009 elections will be worse than the 2004 elections, because the Tunisian people have now been completely deprived of the right to choose

their candidates. Jribi added that the GOT is disregarding all democratic and election competition principles by selecting candidates for the opposition parties.

¶6. (SBU) Jribi claimed that the GOT, under the pretext of preserving national sovereignty, blatantly ignored the opposition request for an amendment to the electoral code and the presence of foreign election observers. She commended the PDP's responsible reaction to all the hostile campaign pressure exerted by the GOT following the nomination of Chebbi as their presidential candidate. She accused the GOT of frustrating the electoral process and keeping the Tunisian people in continuous political subservience.

¶7. (C) In a separate meeting on August 26, Mokthar Trifi, President of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) told poloff that two days prior to the PDP press conference, he and other members of Tunisian civil society privately met with Chebbi and tried to convince him to consider letting Jribi represent the party at the presidential elections. Trifi claimed that Chebbi and the PDP had decided that since the elections were already pre-determined, it served the party better to take a political stand and withdraw completely from the presidential elections. This political stand will serve as the party's continuous denouncement of the elections and GOT politics.

The Next Step for the PDP

¶8. (SBU) At the August 25 press conference, both Chebbi and Jribi stressed that although the PDP was withdrawing from the presidential elections, the party was preparing to contest the legislative elections. Chebbi said that the legislative elections were devoid of any laws preventing the party and members of the opposition from participating in the elections. The PDP has a list of 26 candidates for elections in all 24 provinces and also has backup candidates should the GOT refuse to let any of the party's candidates run. Chebbi stated that the PDP will focus on the legislative seats to continue its struggle for political integration and openness. In the days following the PDP's press conference, no domestic media carried the story except for their own party

weekly, with only Al-Jazeera (strongly disliked by the GOT)
holding a phone interview with Chebbi on August 26.

Comment

19. (C) This move is a significant about-face for the PDP, which had been vowing to contest this race "against all odds" (ref A). The intriguing question begged by this move is what their true motive was? Were Chebbi or the PDP successfully threatened or blackmailed by the GOT? Or did they belatedly recalculate that a boycott of the presidential race would be a more profound statement than a defiant, uphill run? They may simply have decided their resources would be better spent trying to secure a few seats in parliament. The PDP's withdrawal leaves three, and possibly four, opposition parties in the running: the People's Unity Party (PUP), the Ettajdid Movement, the United Democratic Union (UDU) and possibly the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (FDTL). Of these, Ettajdid and the FDTL are the least "tame". End comment.

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